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QUESTIONS MOST OFTEN ASKED ABOUT EYESIGHT BY PEOPLE OVER 60

One of the most precious of all human senses is our sight. Our eyes, therefore, are highly prized and any threat to them arouses great concern.

Few people are knowledgeable about their own eyes and those ailments which might limit vision. They are equally unaware of the help that is available to deal with problems if they should occur.

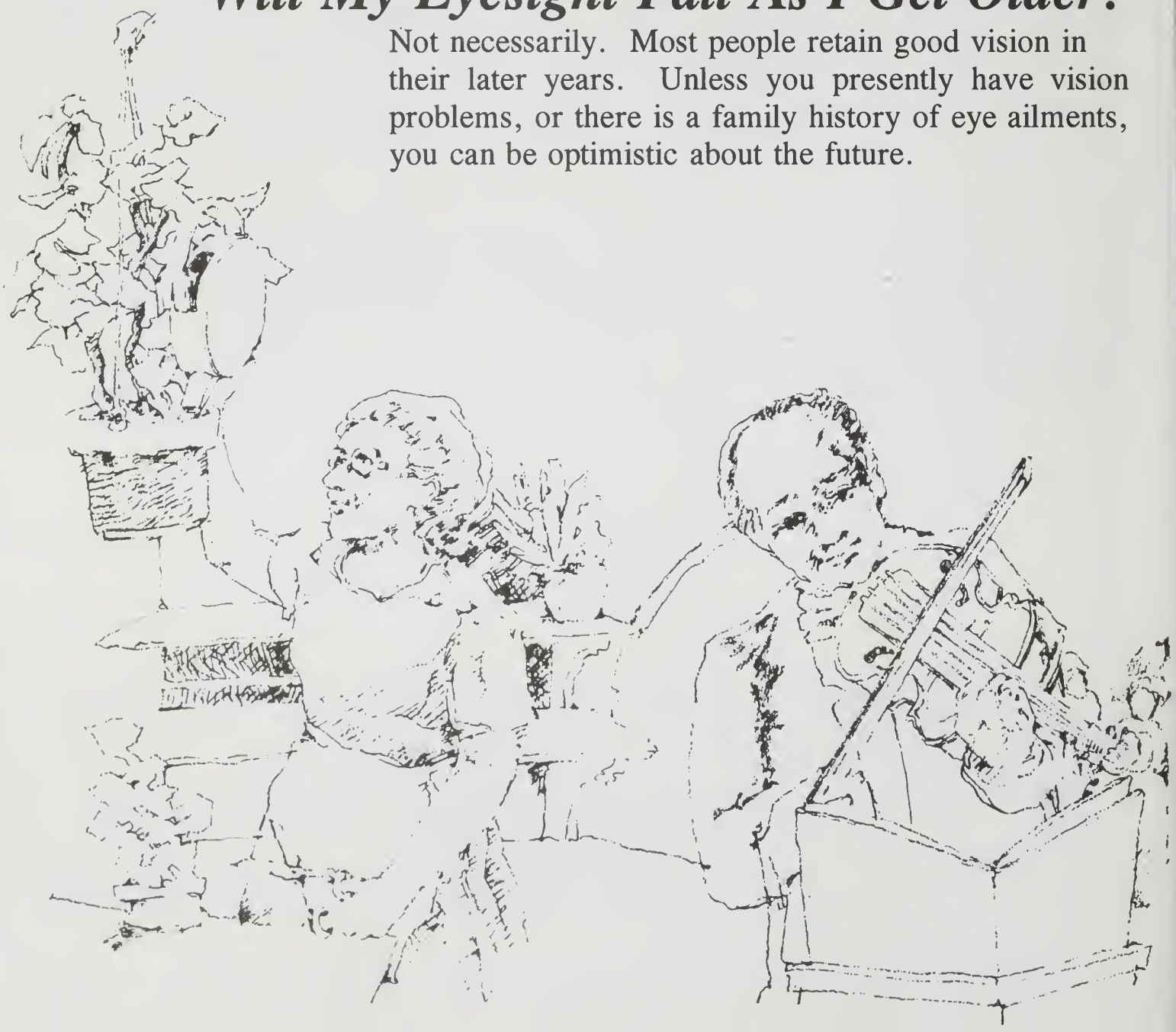
The following information is intended to be interesting, reassuring, and helpful. It is addressed to people who are over sixty in the hope that it will provide the background information to eliminate unnecessary fears and misconceptions surrounding visual loss.

We dedicate this booklet to
Ann Jacobson
whose brighter vision of life
for the elderly enriched us all.

PART 1: QUESTIONS MOST OFTEN ASKED ABOUT EYESIGHT BY PEOPLE OVER SIXTY

Will My Eyesight Fail As I Get Older?

Not necessarily. Most people retain good vision in their later years. Unless you presently have vision problems, or there is a family history of eye ailments, you can be optimistic about the future.



Are Reading And Watching TV Bad For The Eyes?

Not at all. Our eyes are meant to be used. Like other organs of the body, they benefit from exercise. Should our eyes become tired or "strained," they can be refreshed with a rest.

How Often Should I Have My Eyes Examined?

Every two years, at least. If you have not had a checkup within the past 24 months, we recommend one soon.

What Are Some Common Signs Of Failing Vision?

Unlike other physical ailments, people seldom feel pain with eye disorders. Problems develop gradually, and may go for months, even for years, unnoticed. Here are some signals to watch for:

- Sitting closer and closer to the television
- Needing to get "stronger" eye glasses more often
- Difficulty reading the newspaper
- Being bothered by bright lights
- Accidentally bumping into chairs and doors
- Tripping over curbstones and steps
- Knocking things over at the table
- Lessening ability to see well at night

What Are The Most Common Eye Diseases For Older People?

- GLAUCOMA
- MACULAR DEGENERATION
- DIABETIC RETINOPATHY
- CATARACTS

What Is Glaucoma?

Increased pressure within the eye as a result of various possible defects in the normal drainage system can lead to the disease known as glaucoma and possible "tunnel vision." This condition may be described as "looking at the world through a straw." People with "tunnel vision" must turn the head from side to side to avoid bumping into things or to see food on the edges of the plate since such vision is confined to objects directly ahead. The disease also affects a person's vision in dim light and results in "night blindness."

Glaucoma usually causes little discomfort. A person may experience a vague ache, watery eyes, or halos around objects. Glaucoma is "the painless thief of sight."

Fortunately, glaucoma is easily detected by an eye doctor. If diagnosed early, it can be controlled with special eye drops. Glaucoma patients who remain faithful to treatment may continue to enjoy useful vision as long as they live.

What Is Macular Degeneration?

This is a disease in which the central area of the retina known as the macula degenerates. It is an occasional complication associated with the aging process in some individuals. The macula is that part of the retina which achieves the sharpest focus. The peripheral or side vision which remains does not normally reveal fine detail and the central vision is deeply blurred by this disease.

What Is Diabetic Retinopathy?

This disease is one of the complications caused by diabetes which is a leading cause of blindness. Only a small percentage of diabetics are affected and those who reach this stage are mostly juvenile diabetics. Juvenile diabetics are those who have had diabetes from early childhood rather than those who have become diabetic later in life. The disease is unpredictable because the level of vision may change from day to day. The ability to see fades and sharpens irregularly, thus baffling the individual and his family and friends.

What Is A Cataract?

A clouding of the normally clear lens of the eye is called a cataract. With a cataract, vision becomes blurred or dim. The development of cataracts are usually related to aging, much as graying of hair or wrinkling of skin, but not all cataracts progress to any significant level. Many stabilize, never requiring surgery. In advanced cases, the defective lens is removed in one of the simplest and most successful medical operations. Recovery of good vision can be expected if there are no other complications present. Lens implants, which are almost universally used today, offer the best hope for improved vision after cataract surgery.

What Is Meant By "Legally Blind?"

Generally speaking, a person is said to be legally blind when the best possible eyeglasses no longer can restore vision in the better eye to a defined functioning level. A report of this condition is required to be made by the examining doctor directly to the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind. The Commission can then initiate the delivery of many services to support and maintain a high level of functioning.

Does Being Declared Legally Blind Mean That Eventually One Will Become Totally Blind?

Not necessarily. Very few people who are legally blind ever lose all vision. As a matter of fact, most people retain a surprising degree of partial sight, which is one of the reasons that many who are legally blind do not realize that they need the help that is available to them.

Can't One Tell By Looking If Someone Is Legally Blind?

Usually not. There are very few instances where there are any outward signs in the eyes.

What If I Do Not Wish To Be Reported As Legally Blind To The Massachusetts Commission For The Blind?

The examining doctor is required to report by law. What may be requested is that no contact be made. In that case, "Do Not Contact" should be written across the top of the report. That request will be honored. The information is confidential, no agency or person may have access to it or to whether or not a person is registered.

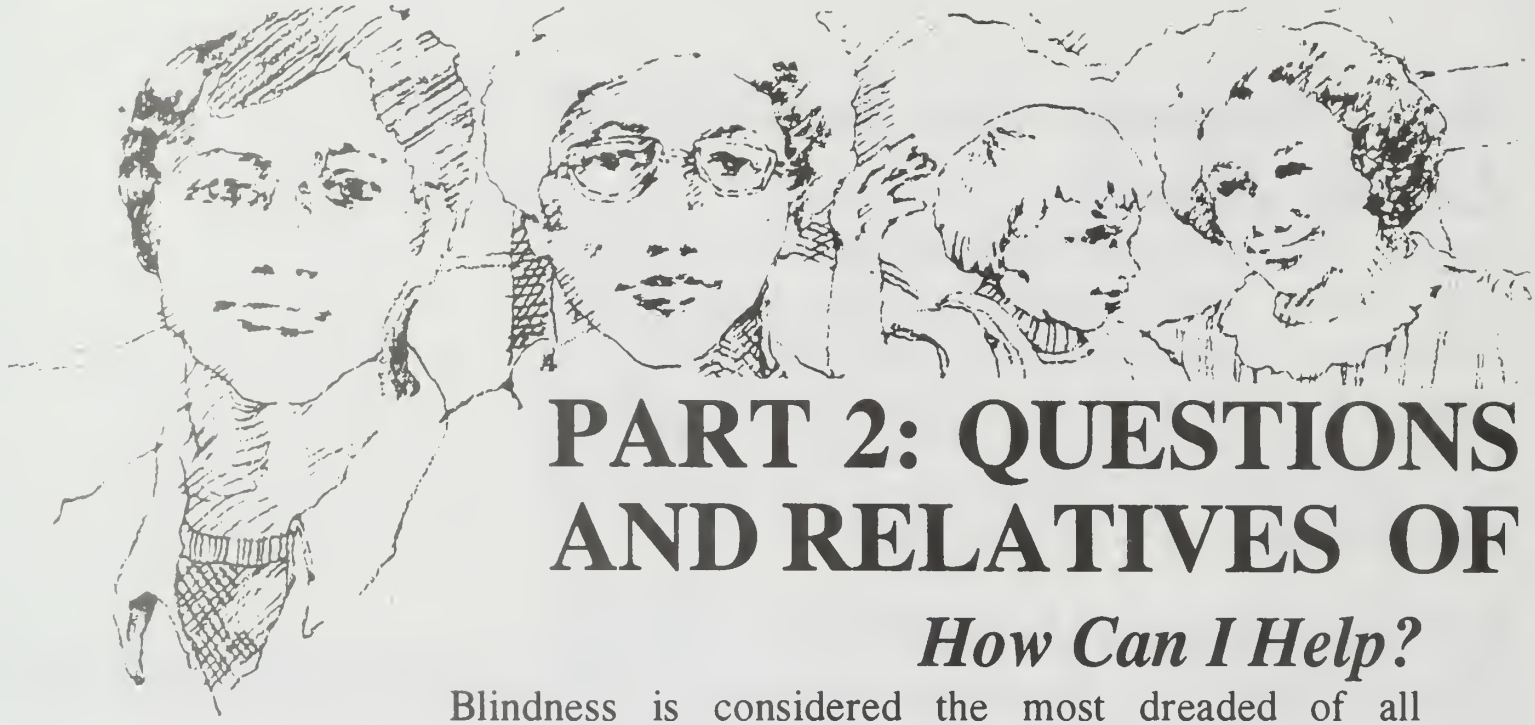
Why Do Some People Resist Being Reported As Legally Blind?

Some resist out of pride: they don't wish to be considered "blind!" They may fear becoming helpless and dependent if they admit to being legally blind. Others feel it is unnecessary as they will retain some usable vision. All of these reactions make it difficult for people to accept the help that is available to them.

What Programs Are Available To The Legally Blind?

Dozens of services have been designed to help a person with limited vision enjoy a normal, useful life. Programs are custom-tailored to individual needs, and range from "talking books" to instruction for pursuing a totally independent life style. Financial considerations may include added Social Security payments and special tax deductions.

Practically all services are free. Once the examining doctor's report is received, the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind will contact the person. Services will be provided based on the needs, abilities, and desires of the individual involved.



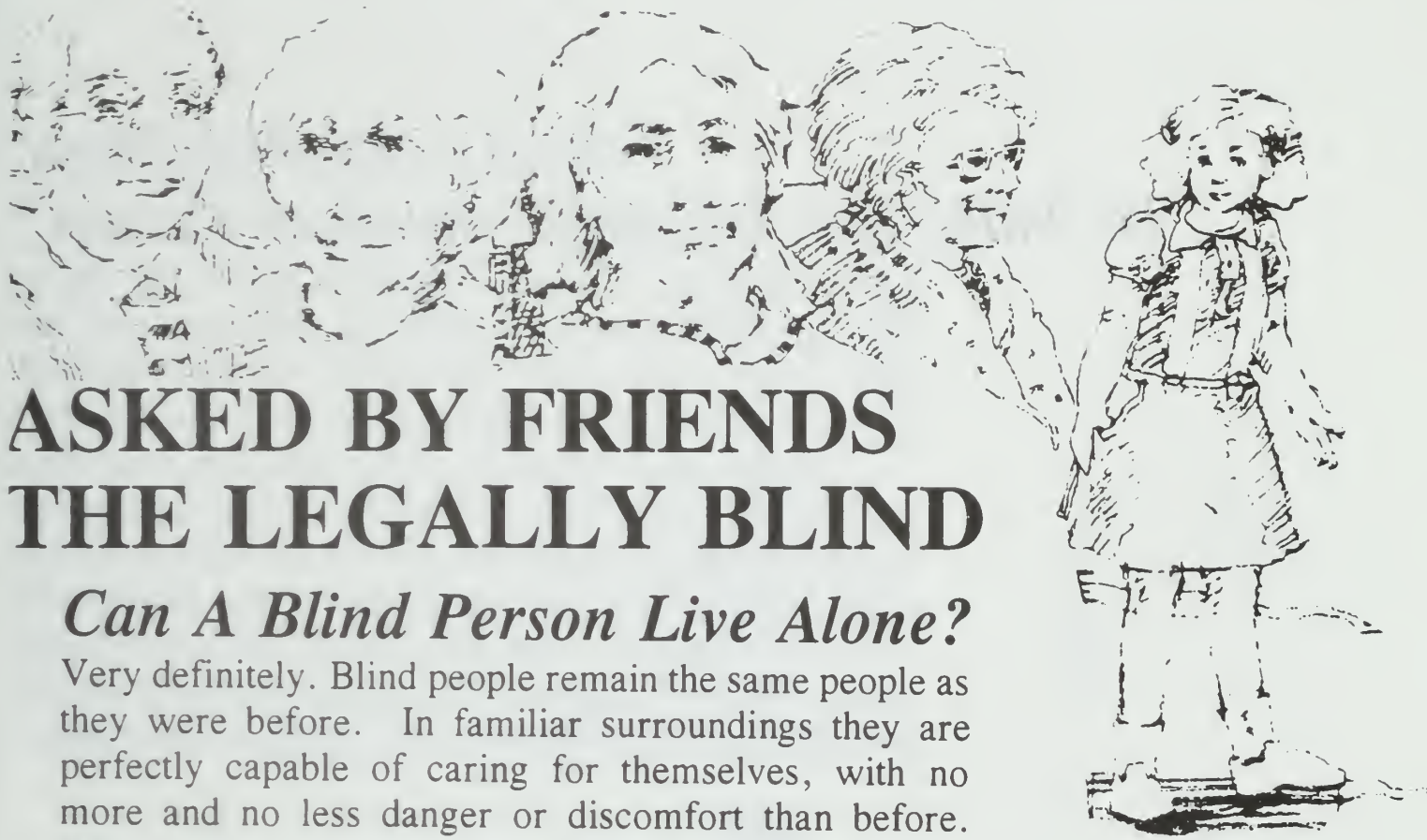
PART 2: QUESTIONS AND RELATIVES OF

How Can I Help?

Blindness is considered the most dreaded of all disabilities. The declaration of legal blindness is almost always followed by a reaction of emotional shock. You can help by just understanding this reaction. Allow people time to grieve, to feel anger and resentment. Then, later encourage them to take full advantage of the many resources available to compensate for the impairment.

Should I Invite My Friend To A Movie?

Why not? Remember, they usually still have partial vision, enough to enjoy the action on the screen while listening to the voices and the music. An active social life is critically important to a blind person. They are not outcasts and should not be regarded as "different."



ASKED BY FRIENDS THE LEGALLY BLIND

Can A Blind Person Live Alone?

Very definitely. Blind people remain the same people as they were before. In familiar surroundings they are perfectly capable of caring for themselves, with no more and no less danger or discomfort than before. There are no automatic restrictions in the life of the legally blind person.

Should Any Words Be Avoided Talking With A Legally Blind Person?

People often tend to become embarrassed in conversations when the words 'look' and 'see' come up. These words should not be avoided. They are common to the language and are understood by the blind person. To avoid them creates awkward situations.

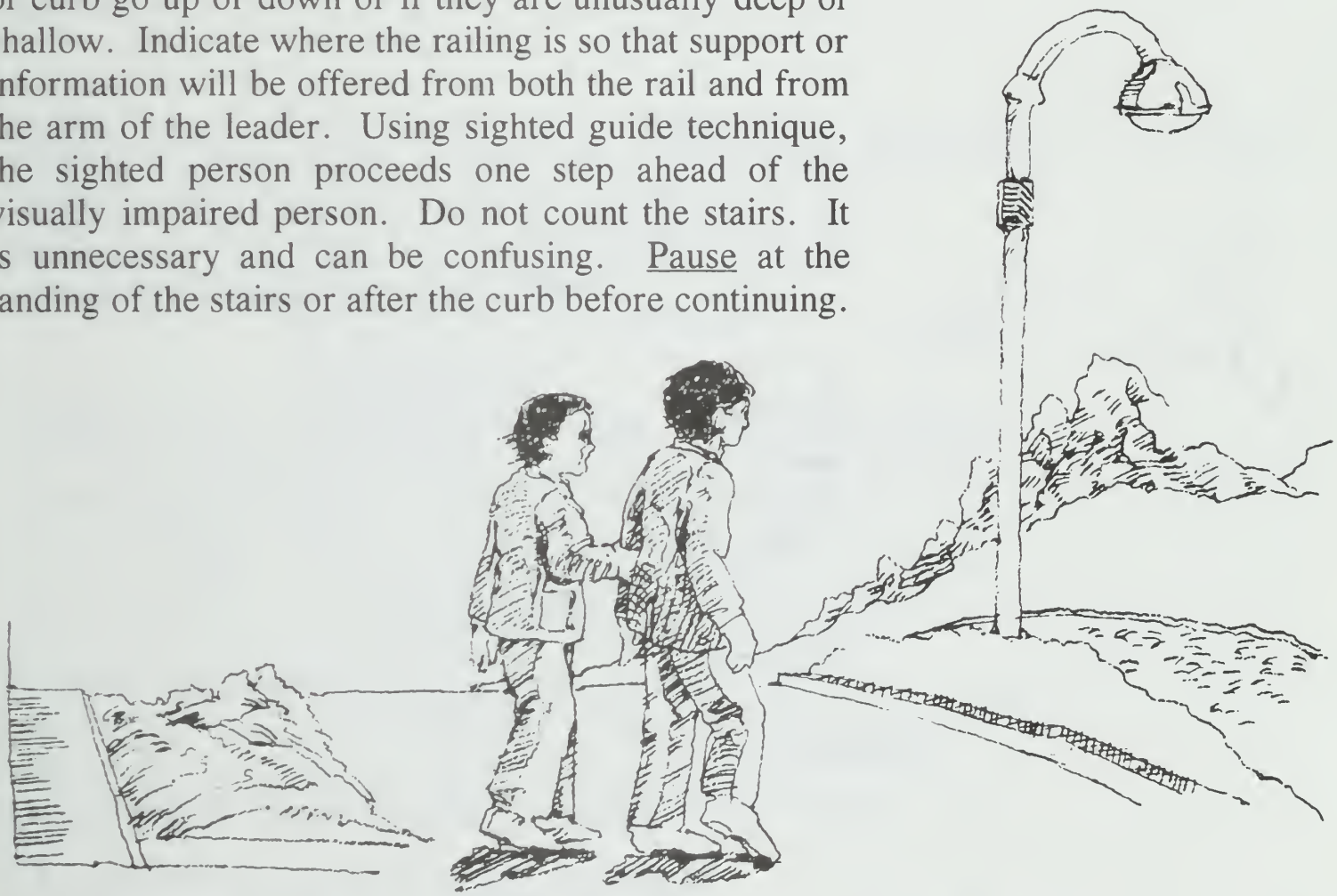
A common problem in conversations with the legally blind is the tendency to speak to them in a raised voice. This can be very uncomfortable for both people unless one of them is, indeed, hard of hearing.

What Is The Best Way To Walk With A Visually Impaired Person?

Allow the person to take your arm above the elbow with the thumb on the outside of your arm and the other fingers on the inside of your arm in a firm grip. The arm should be held in close to the body in a nice 'L' position as illustrated. This puts the one being guided a half-step back so that the sighted person can see any obstacles in the path of travel easily and if the guide must stop quickly, the person being guided will have time to react. When both people learn to trust and relax with each other, it becomes very easy for the guided person to follow the movements of the guide.

How Does One Lead Someone On Stairs Or Curbs?

Using the sighted guide position discussed and illustrated above, pause on the landing of the stairs or the curb. Tell the visually impaired person if the stairs or curb go up or down or if they are unusually deep or shallow. Indicate where the railing is so that support or information will be offered from both the rail and from the arm of the leader. Using sighted guide technique, the sighted person proceeds one step ahead of the visually impaired person. Do not count the stairs. It is unnecessary and can be confusing. Pause at the landing of the stairs or after the curb before continuing.

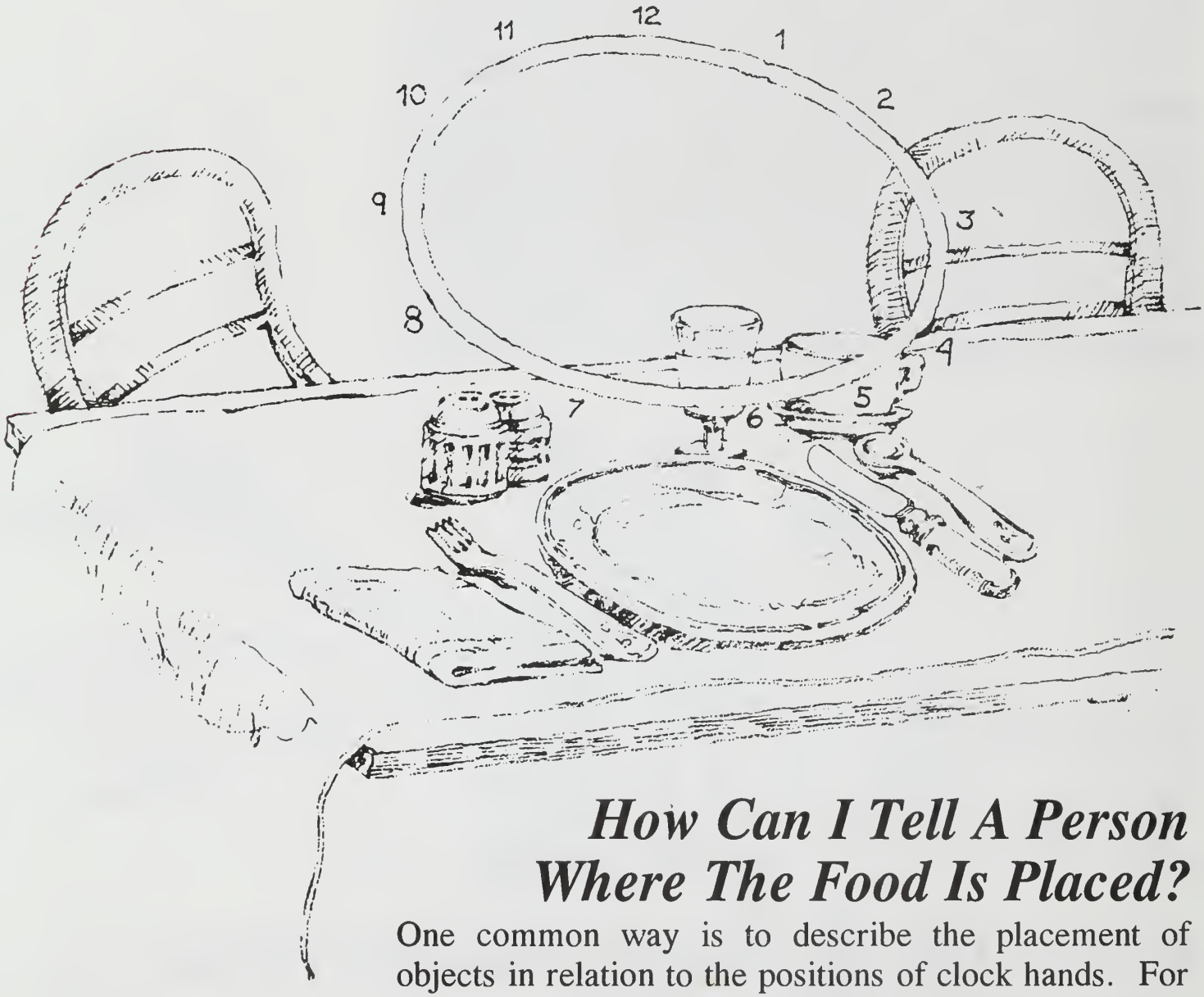


Do You Tell The Visually Impaired Person About All The Obstacles?

Only if they will present a problem for the travelers. It is a good idea to tell someone when there is a curb or step to maneuver. Pause briefly and indicate whether the curb is up or down and whether it is unusually deep or unusually shallow.

Should I Cut Up The Food For My Blind Friends?

Only if the help is asked for. Most people can do this perfectly well for themselves and will ask for help if they cannot manage.



How Can I Tell A Person Where The Food Is Placed?

One common way is to describe the placement of objects in relation to the positions of clock hands. For example, something at the top of the plate would be described as being at twelve o'clock. Usually the person can find the food without help by lightly moving the tip of the knife around the plate. Different textures and shapes will supply adequate information.

What Do I Do When I Have To Leave A Blind Person Alone Briefly?

Be sure to explain that you are leaving and how long you might be gone. Leave them holding onto something so that they don't feel lost in space. For instance, place one of their hands on a table and tell them generally where they are and what they are holding onto.

How Does One Seat A Visually Impaired Person?

Place the visually impaired person's hand on the back or the side of the chair. After exploring the chair, the visually impaired person seats himself.

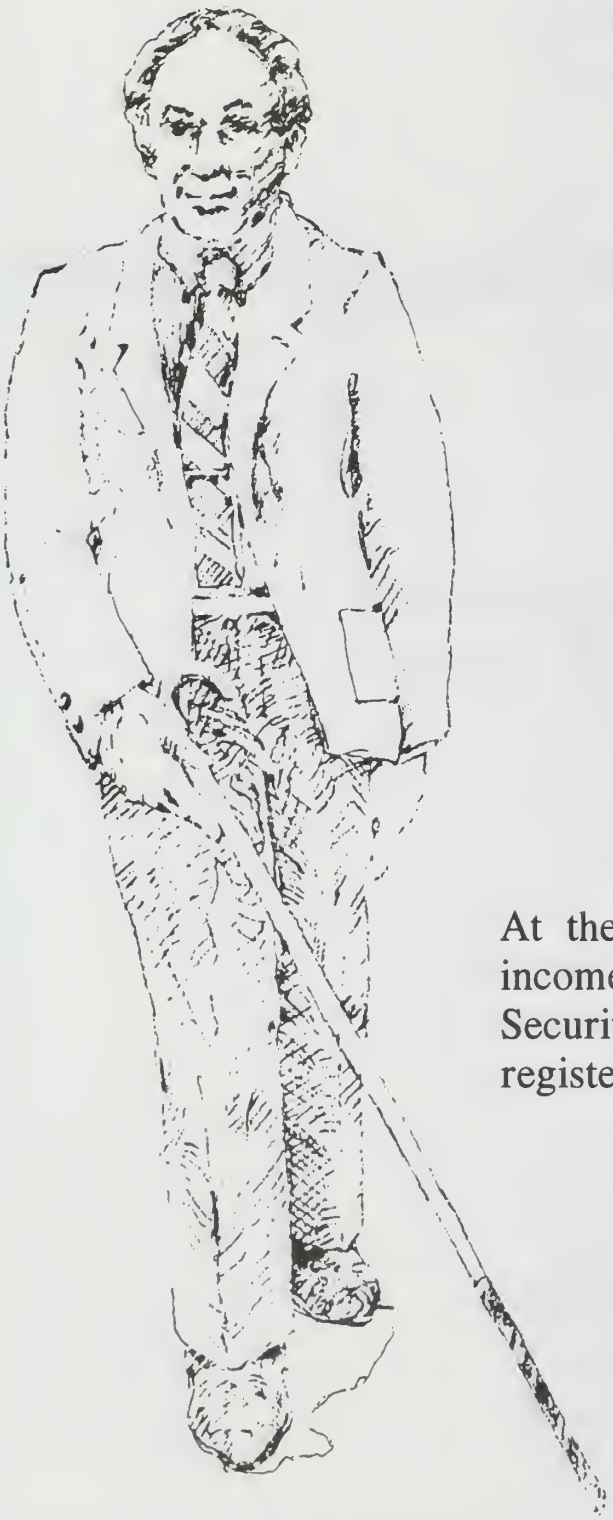
How Do I Describe The Surroundings So My Friend Can Understand Them?

Give a broad picture at first and then fill in with the most important details, gradually adding any further information that seems desirable. Proceed in an orderly fashion. Start with the scene directly facing the person, explaining that you are describing what is in front of them, then proceed by telling them what is to their right, what is behind them, and then what is to their left.

What Kind Of Help Is Most Useful For Me To Offer?

Try to remain the same friend you always were. Don't do more than is asked for. One of the most pressing needs for many people is someone to read mail.

PART3: QUESTIONS MOST OFTEN ASKED BY THOSE WHO ARE LEGALLY BLIND



What Kinds Of Assistance Are Available?

Financial Assistance
Instruction
Special aids and appliances
Low vision devices

What Kind Of Financial Assistance?

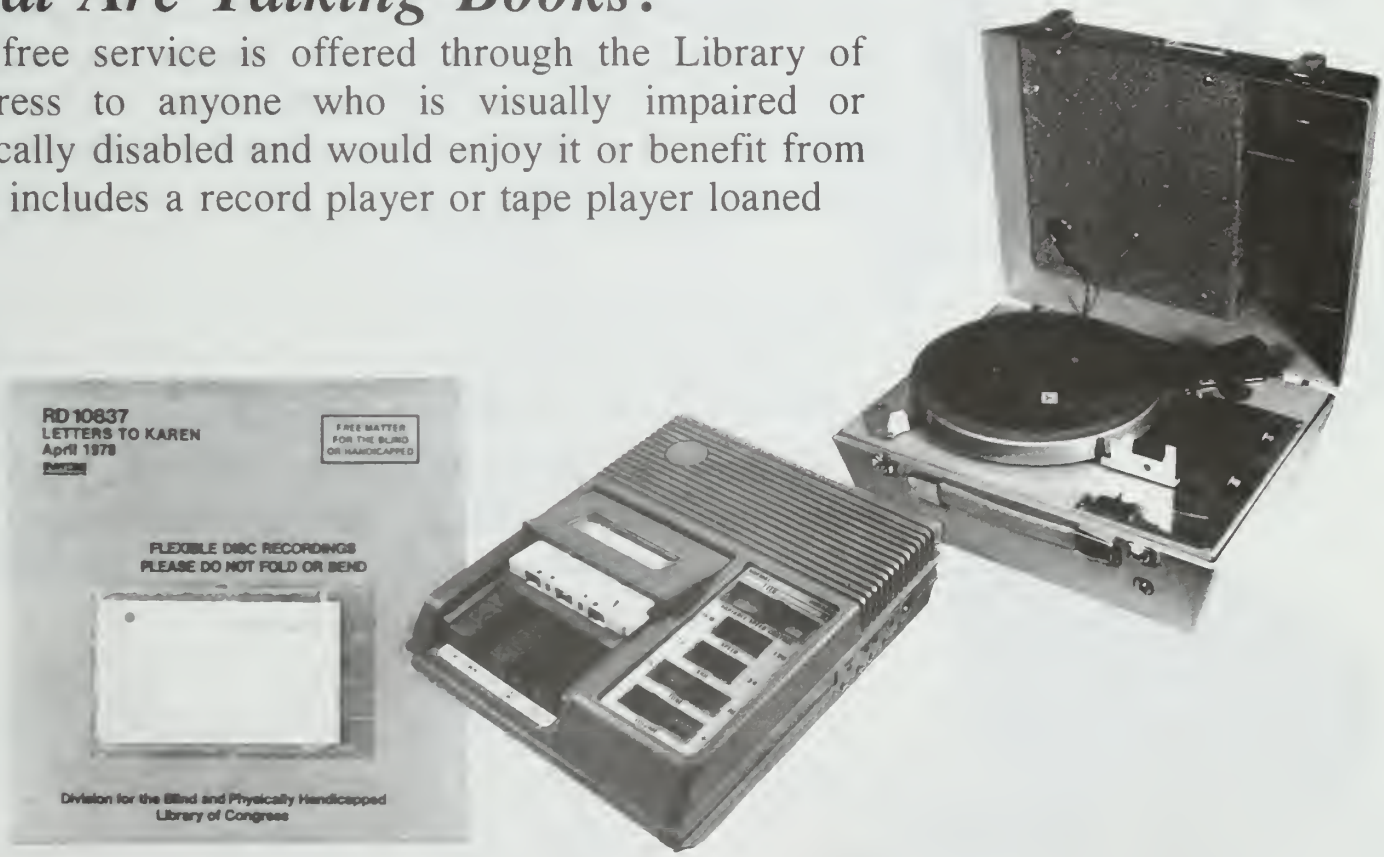
At the very least, there is an added exemption on income taxes. For those on Supplemental Social Security, there may be an added increment for those registered as legally blind.

What Kind Of Instruction?

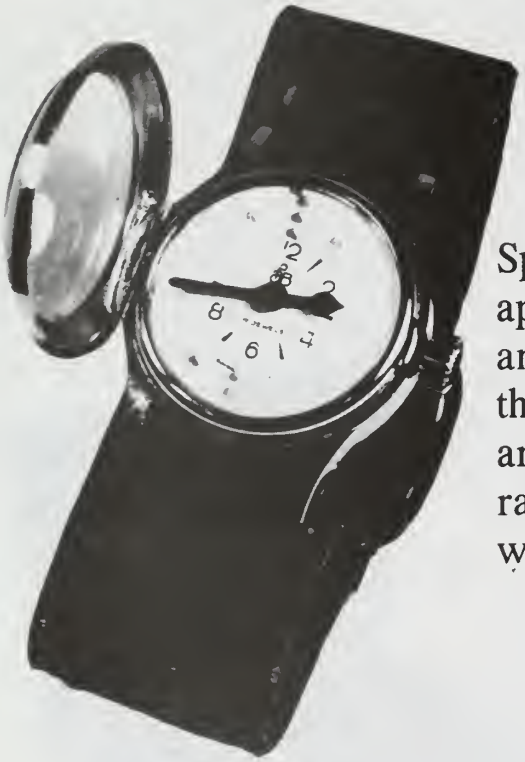
Teachers offer training in mobility and orientation, including instruction in independent travel with and without a cane. They orient individuals to their immediate surroundings and when someone moves to a new or unfamiliar setting this service is provided to help adjust to the new environment. They also offer training in activities of daily living, such as dressing, bathing, cooking, housekeeping, shopping, and eating, as well as training in communication: learning to write notes, to label things, to keep a checking account, and to use the telephone. Complete or partial instruction is offered, depending on the needs of the individual. The instruction is free, and is arranged through a case worker who is sent from the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind.

What Are Talking Books?

This free service is offered through the Library of Congress to anyone who is visually impaired or physically disabled and would enjoy it or benefit from it. It includes a record player or tape player loaned



without charge and records or tapes on which magazines and books are recorded. Selections are made by the recipient and sent and returned free of charge through the mails. Other aids may accompany the service such as earphones, pillow phones, or remote controls. Current catalogues do not list all titles since this would be too costly and unmanageable. Religious texts are available. Many foreign titles are available. There is an especially good supply in Spanish, French, Italian, Portugese and German.



What Kinds Of Aids And Appliances Are Available?

Special timepieces with raised markings and open faces, appliances that are adapted with raised dial markings, and other simple devices that are especially useful to those who are visually impaired. Shown on this page are a timer with raised dots on the dial, a watch with raised dots on its face, and an enlarged telephone dial with raised numbers.

Who Supplies These?

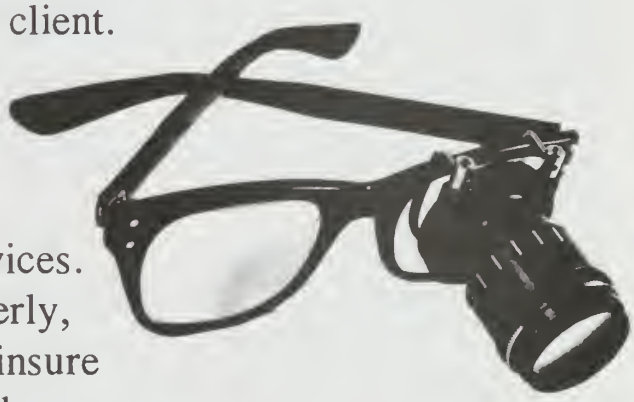
These may be purchased directly from the American Foundation for the Blind, the Carroll Center, and Massachusetts Association for the Blind. Addresses are at the back of this booklet.

What Are Low Vision Devices?

Low vision devices are special aids such as a distance viewer, a monocular (for use with one eye), or a variety of magnifying glasses. They are not like regular glasses. They do enable people to make the most of their useable vision, but require patience and practice. On this page, from top to bottom, are a pocket magnifying glass, a distance viewer that attaches to a pair of glasses for watching television, and a hand held distance viewer or monocular.

How Can I Get Them?

They are available from low vision clinics that are especially geared to dealing with this kind of problem. Referrals are either made directly by physicians or through the caseworker from the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind for the client.



What Do The Clinics Do?

They evaluate and prescribe the appropriate devices. Patients are taught how to use the devices properly, are counseled in their use, and are followed to insure correct management since they can only be used successfully under special conditions of lighting and distance.

Who Pays For This?

Depending upon the individual circumstances, the cost may be met by medical insurance when the individual is legally blind.

AGENCIES

COUNCILS ON AGING

■Every community has a local council on aging which can direct individuals to local resources.

HOME CARE CORPORATIONS

■There are 27 private non-profit agencies across the state to serve the needs of those over 60 in the community. Many services including information and referral are available through case managers.

■THE ELDER ABUSE HOTLINE
1-800-922-2275, To report elder abuse or neglect.

NATIONAL EYE CARE INSTITUTE
1-800-222-3937

■This program may provide care to those who have had no recent contact with a physician or who lack the resources for appropriate medical care.

MASS COMMISSION FOR THE BLIND
88 Kingston St.
Boston, MA 02111
617-727-5550 or 1-800-392-6450
1-800-392-6556/TDD

■The designated state agency providing comprehensive services, all without fee, to legally blind residents. A phone tape provides items of interest and current information during nonbusiness hours.

REGIONAL TALKING BOOK LIBRARY
175 North Beacon St.
Watertown, MA 02172
617-924-3434 or 1-800-852-3133

■Talking book machines are delivered and serviced through this source.

MASS ASSOCIATION FOR THE BLIND
200 Ivy St.
Brookline, MA 02146
617-738-5110 or 1-800-682-9200
617-731-6444/TDD

■Aids, appliances, volunteer information.

VISION FOUNDATION, INC.
818 Mt. Auburn St.
Watertown, MA 02172
617-926-4232 or 1-800-852-3029

■Self-help organization for newly blind, visually impaired and people with progressive eye disease.

VETERANS ADMINISTRATION
Outpatient Clinic
251 Causeway St.
Boston, MA 02114
1-617-248-1000

■Any veteran who is visually impaired may be eligible for help that may otherwise not be available.

MASS RADIO READING SERVICE
Network: 1-800-992-9505

■Reading of newspapers, magazines and best sellers available on special radio receivers, stereo TV and many cable systems.

CARROLL CENTER FOR THE BLIND
770 Centre St.
Newton, MA 02158
617-969-6200 or 1-800-852-3131

■Residential rehabilitation program, low vision aids and devices, and recreational services.

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